



A STORY OF A
MAGIC FAMILY
BOOK 1

THE LITTLE
WITCH AND
THE LOST BOY

WRITTEN AND
ILLUSTRATED
BY RONALD CRAIG

The Little Witch
and the Lost Boy
Book 1
Ronald Craig

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DEDICATION

For my daughter

I came up with the idea for this story after my daughter was born. I had thought long and hard about my daughter's future and how she will manage her new experiences, and I decided to write this story for her. The writing process incorporated tools such as mindfulness, labelling and understanding emotions, as well as my own life experiences. The Little Witch tells the story of a young girl growing up, and was inspired by the learning process my family went through after her birth. Join Nina as she discovers what it means to be a young girl, while also struggling to become a witch. There will be challenging experiences and new friendships along the way.

Chapters

1. The Whosley's
2. The red dawn
3. The frozen wood's
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have been writing an adult book since 2010 called *The Black Path*. When my daughter was born, I began to think about what she would experience as she grows. Thoughts and ideas taken from my adult book helped me process what I think it means to be a young girl growing up. My academic training in post-traumatic stress disorders, social care, equality and diversity helped me understand new emotions and life experiences as I was writing. This is the reason *The Little Witch* came about.

This book would also not be possible without the help of my daughter, who is my inspiration, and has given me new experiences and emotions from the day she was born.

Publishing is such a daunting experience and the support. Thank you to Odyssey Books, who walked me through the process and handled all of my professional editing needs.

I'd also like to particularly thank my partner who spend the time answering my numerous questions and ever ending tinkering with notes and illustrations also my mother, who not only gave me feedback, but spent years reading children's books to me, and taught me about the diverse world. Finally, I would like to thank my primary school teacher, Mr. Handley, who spent years inspiring his classes through books and stories, making learning fun.



Prologue

I'm only known as grandfather to a granddaughter I am yet to know, I will tell you of our story and especially about my granddaughter as she grows. The story I am about to tell you is a secret that you must not share with anyone. In a peaceful little village in England, there are many rumours of witches and wizards. There have been stories of strange happenings, but no one knows if they are true. People are said to disappear without a trace, leaving an animal behind in their place. But these are not normal animals. The cats are without whiskers, the bats without wings. The village is said to be swamped by frogs, rats, bats and toads. Also, living there is a quiet family called the Whosley's, who might know why this happens. Their manner is as friendly as a family could be. But some have started to wonder if this is merely a trick so that you do not discover their secret.



Chapter 1

The Whosley's

The Whosley's may have been a peculiar family, but at first it wasn't clear how. They looked as normal as any family ever does. The father, Reginald, was a tall man with jet-black hair. He had a kind manner and a jovial nature. His wife, Ruby May, possessed a warm smile and a gentle presence. Their son, Relck, was sharp-witted, with a firm resolve and a caring heart. But there was more to him than met the eye. He had a special bond with his sister, and was always there for her when she needed him most. Relck got his looks from his father and his unfamiliar name from a secret family tale.

Sophina was the youngest of the family, and her name meant 'strong-hearted girl'. She was often called Nina for short. Nina was born with a witch's gift that allowed her to change the colour of her hair and eyes, astounding her parents. Her mother would smile down at her and wonder who her little girl would turn out to be.

The family lived in an average house on a street called Lime Grove. The children loved their neighbourhood, but rarely had friends over to visit. It is very difficult to keep magic hidden, especially when you have an owl as a friend!

One of these was Relck's best pal, named Raspy for the strange hoot he made. With feathers, as black as the night sky, splashed with the brightest yellow and green, he was a large and intimidating animal. Nina had grown up with her own owl, and they were also the closest of friends. Toots was small for his kind, but his brown outer feathers hid an amazing autumn-coloured plumage underneath.

The Whosley's were no ordinary family, and they guarded their secret closely. Those who discovered it would find themselves turned into a frog, a bat, or a toad. The family worked for the secret Order of the Feathers, helping people all over the world. But it was easier said than done. Together they always tried their hardest to bring joy and safety to the world – it was what they did best.



Chapter 2

The Red Dawn

Our story starts early one Sunday morning. Nina's bedroom was dark and cold; only a sliver of morning sunlight peeked through the curtains. A clunk, a drip and a glug broke the silence as the heating pipes began to warm the house. Nina stirred from her slumber, listening to the hustle and bustle of the kitchen downstairs. She loved this time of the morning, and the warm feeling of love and safety she felt from her family. But she was also excited about the day to come, and the adventures it would bring.

Toots slept silently on his perch, and the dawn illuminated the wonderful colours of his feathers.

'You truly are a wonderful owl,' Nina thought to herself.

He began to stir, ruffling his feathers. This made him look as if he had a fire that glowed from within, which ran across every feather, down to his very tail.

Suddenly the silence was broken as their mother called up the stairs.

'Come on you two, time to get up. Breakfast is ready.'

Nina jumped up at once. 'I wonder what will happen today?' she cried.

'It's a Sunday,' Toots moaned under his breath.

Nina smiled. 'Come on lazy bird, there's a beautiful red sky this morning.'

Toots turned to Nina, looking wide-eyed, 'A red sky in the morning is a warning from Mother Nature,' he hooted.

Nina considered what her friend said, but then dashed off to wash up.

She grabbed Toots and ran downstairs for breakfast.

Nina opened the kitchen door to the noise and smell of breakfast.

'Good morning,' said Reg, with a loving smile for his daughter. 'You'll need to hurry up and eat your breakfast. Relck is waiting for you – you're both needed at the Order.'

Nina looked at Toots with excitement in her eyes, wondering what was going on.



NOW FULLY AWAKE WITH breakfast finished, Nina hugged and kissed her parents as she hurried upstairs. She had a naturally sunny attitude, and she couldn't wait to see what the Order had in store for them.

Back in the bedroom Nina studied her wardrobe. 'Hmm,' she muttered, 'what to wear?'

Toots sighed. 'Just put on something casual, you know that choosing clothes is a waste of time. When you travel through the magic mirror to the Order of the Feathers, the journey through time and space disguises the witch or wizard, so that no one will be aware.'

Nina smiled at her impatient friend. 'I know,' she said. 'But I still like to choose.' She grabbed a pair of jeans and a jumper, throwing a coat over her arm just in case.

The two friends turned to look at the mirror, which stood next to the window. Toots, who hated traveling through the mirror, tucked himself in Nina's arms.

'I'm here with you,' she said as she grabbed her wand and witch's pouch, reassuring her best friend.

As she touched the mirror Nina spoke the secret words of the Order and reached into her witch's pouch to sprinkle magic dust.

'Witchy Witchy Woo, hear my cry Mother Nature. I offer you the eye of a frog and the wing of a bat. Take me to the Order, past the darkness and into the light.' With a swish, a swoosh and a spark from her wand, they were gone.

It was as if they flowed into the mirror like liquid. Through time and space their bodies twisted and turned, as light and darkness flashed past their eyes. When they arrived at the Order, Nina found she was now dressed in her witch's cloak. They stepped out onto the hard, cold stone floor. There was no warmth in the air, only the emptiness of the Great Hall, which was eerily dark. A few candles lit the dim corridor and the smoke from a dying fire filled their nostrils.

Toots was nauseated after passing through the mirror. He took a moment to compose himself, and then they both looked around for somebody to greet them. However, the room was empty and silent.

Toots was annoyed and a little afraid. 'Let's look for Raspy,' he screeched, stretching out his wings as he hopped onto Nina's shoulder. Almost immediately he wished that he had remained in the safety of her arms. He felt vulnerable without the warm embrace. They walked along the long, long, silent corridor.

'He will be in the Inventor's room, on the left at the end of the corridor.' Toots hooted as quietly as he possibly could.

Nina was both excited and scared as they ventured forward, holding their breath in anticipation of the unknown situation ahead.

Suddenly they heard a deep, slow hoot. The closer they got to the Inventor's room, the louder the hoot became. They were relieved to know they were not alone. Nina knocked on the worn, red wooden door and peered inside. With a screech, it opened to reveal Relck and Raspy watching the Inventor work. The room was dimly lit with candles and only a small coloured window let in any natural light.

This was the first-time Nina and Toots had visited the Inventor's room, and they could barely contain their excitement. The walls were filled with books and inventions of all shapes and sizes. Some were even hidden under sheets, kept away from prying eyes.

The Inventor was a short man with a rather large belly. He looked up at them with a warm, friendly smile.

'Come in, come in,' he called. We have been waiting for you.'

Relck greeted them with a half-smile. Nina knew that he was hiding something, which only made her more curious.

'We have a job for you two,' said Relck as he handed them a scroll, 'but only if you're brave enough!'

Relck knew that Nina would rise to any challenge he could set. He looked at Toots carefully. 'This task may concern your grandfather's disappearance,' he said gravely.

Toots had heard many stories about his grandfather, the Great Owl and Head of the Order of Feathers, who had vanished when he was very small. His disappearance was a mystery – all anyone knew was the Red Witch and a black cat with green eyes had been spotted at the same time.

'This is an important assignment. You two had best be off,' said Relck, with a nod of dismissal.

Nina took the hint and scooped up Toots in her arms. The pair returned to the hallway in silence, wondering what adventures were to come. Toots

felt sick just thinking about what could happen. The Great Hall was now full of witches and wizards going about their daily duties. Lit candles shone brightly on the dark wooden walls, and the black and white marbled floor cast strange reflections. Looking at the magic mirror from this side was slightly daunting. It stood ten feet tall, hanging on a small frame as if by magic.

Nina opened the scroll and read their instructions carefully. 'We have to go to the cottage in the woods and look for a secret,' she told Toots, 'one that will reveal itself without our knowledge.'

Toots raised his eyelids and tutted, expressing his annoyance at such a vague clue.

Nina smiled at him and continued to read the scroll. 'It says that the cottage will be nestled in dense woodland, in an unknown environment.'

Nina was apprehensive, worried at where they might end up. She took a deep breath, wanting to get on with the task and not be afraid. She shot a nervous glance at Toots and saw that he was also worried.

With a deep breath, Nina touched the mirror and whispered the magic words. 'Witchy Witchy Woo, hear my cry Mother Nature.' Reaching into her witch's pouch, she sprinkled her magic dust. 'I offer you tail of newt and a whisker of rat. Give me the power to travel through dark and light, take me to the cottage where I seek a secret that may not be understood.'

With a swish, a swoosh and spark from her wand they vanished into the unknown.



Chapter 3

The Frozen Woods

A bright light hit the adventurers straight in the eyes and they struggled to adjust to the sunny day. They looked around and began to shiver as a blast of frozen air roared across the woods they were now standing in.

Nina was now dressed for winter in a large fluffy coat and matching snow boots. The trees around them were spiny and bare. Even though it was midsummer, not a single leaf was growing. An eerie white mist rose from the hard, frozen path, as if it chilled everything it touched. Mother Nature herself seemed to have cursed this place, holding back the summer growth. There were no blooming flowers, only the wintry frost remained. As Nina and Toots gazed into the distance, they spotted a small cottage at the end of a mud road.

Already the pair felt an urge to return home to their family immediately.

Toots hooted, 'I bet there's no mirror in that cottage, it's a trap!' He was unnerved, but wanted to keep up a brave face. 'How would we escape?' he hooted worryingly.

Nina nodded in agreement. 'I don't know, but we have to be brave. We don't know what we will find inside.'

'Will you turn them into toads?' Toots hooted nervously.

'You want me to turn everyone into a toad.' Nina chuckled. 'We must go inside to look for clues.'

Although she urged Toots on, Nina was also feeling nervous. An uneasy panic was gathering inside her.

Mustering her courage and determination, Nina started forward. Toots flapped his small wings and took flight, keeping close to her side.

As they walked down the frozen dirt road, the cottage inched closer. Nina glanced at Toots, knowing that she was leading him into the unknown. The garden that surrounded the cottage had frozen over.

Deprived of the summer sun, the plants and flowers had withered. Nina opened the gate and led them up a stone path, pausing at the brown door. There was a plaque on the wall, but the name was obscured by ice. Even

when Nina wiped it, the frost remained frozen solid. Pointing her wand at it, she whispered the secret magic words.

‘Witchy Witchy Woo, hear my cry Mother Nature.’ She reached into her witch’s pouch and sprinkled her magic dust. ‘I offer you the ear of a bat, and the toenail of a rat. In darkest night and warmest day, give me the power to burn.’

After a swish, a swoosh and a spark from her wand, a glow rose from the core and the frost slowly melted away to reveal the name Foster.

‘This is a cursed place,’ Toots hooted.

‘Foster must be the family name,’ said Nina. ‘I wonder what has happened here? There could be bad magic about.’

Nina and Toots peered through the window, not knowing what they would see. The house was dusty and almost empty, except for a large grandfather clock.

‘The hands are missing,’ Toots noted. ‘I can see a door ajar on that cabinet.’ He narrowed his big, bright eyes, straining to get a better look. ‘There’s a handle on it, go push the front door!’ Toots cried enthusiastically.

Nina walked to the front door and turned the handle. The frozen door opened with a crisp crack. It sounded as if glass had shattered on the floor. The startled pair stepped inside. A chill touched Nina’s neck and sent a shiver down her spine. She sensed a presence and immediately became more alert. The cold breeze stopped abruptly and silence filled the air.

Both the living room and the kitchen were as bare as the trees outside. The grandfather clock stood proudly next to the staircase.

Nina looked at Toots. ‘This is the only clue there is, but what on earth could it mean?’

‘Check inside,’ Toots instructed.

‘Why not you?’

‘This is a job for hands, not wings,’ he smirked.

‘Some excuse!’ Nina complained.

‘Okay, I will look. Have your wand at the ready,’ Toots chirped.

As they pulled the door wide, they noticed that the pendulum was missing. Nina opened it wider, wand held high. They kept the door at arm’s length, just in case. Their mouths fell open as the door revealed a hidden room. Nina lit the room with her wand. It was cold and empty.

Nina turned on her heel. ‘Well this was a waste of time.’

Toots’s wing cuffed her shoulder and he whispered at her to look up.

A huge cage hung in the air.

Nina looked at Toots. 'You must fly up there,' she instructed.

'Me?' he squawked.

'I only have arms, not wings,' she smirked.

'Fine,' he huffed, trying to hide the fact that he feared heights. He flew up quickly to get it over with.

The empty cage reassured Toots. He perched on the edge and noticed feathers on the cage floor. He scooped them up and flew down to Nina.

'Hmm.' She furrowed her brow. 'We should get back to the Order and show them this.'

'I can't see any mirrors, so we must find that frozen puddle. My power has little strength here,' Toots reminded Nina.

As they left the room and closed the door to the grandfather clock, Nina and Toots were relieved that they had found nothing dangerous inside the cottage. Both were pleased to be leaving this wondrous place, even though they had only questions and no answers.

The further they were from the cottage, the safer they felt. As they reached the clearing with the frozen puddle Toots hopped up into Nina's arms. She touched the puddle and recited the magic words.

'Witchy witchy Woo, hear my cry Mother Nature.' She reached into her witch's pouch. 'I offer you the eye of a frog and the wing of a bat. In coldest night and warmest day, send me through time and space.'

With a swish, a swoosh and a spark from her wand they were gone. Only small footsteps in the ice threatened to reveal their presence, but in a few moments, they had frozen over, leaving no evidence behind.

Arriving back at the Order, Nina and Toots stepped out of the Grand Mirror to find a large group of witches and wizards waiting for them, Relck among them.

'Do you have the feathers?' he asked.

'Show us!' demanded a witch.

Toots passed the feathers to Relck, who glanced at them, and then at those surrounding him.

'It looks likely,' said a wizard in a sombre tone.

Nina looked confused. 'How did you know about these?'

'We were informed by the seer, Wilema.' Relck looked over to where a woman stood by the fire. The reflection of the fire on her red cloak made it seem as if the flames had caressed her.

He turned back to them. 'Toots, it is possible that these feathers could be from your grandfather,' he said softly.

Toots looked surprised. 'Does this mean my grandfather is alive?'

'We don't know yet, but we will do everything we can to find out,' Relck said, his commitment clear. He turned to Nina. 'You need to leave. You're expected at Auntie Paulina's,' he reminded her.

'What about Toots's grandfather? And the people who lived in the cottage?' Nina asked.

'Don't worry, the Order will be considering this,' Relck said with an odd expression on his face. 'You two go home and get ready for your trip.'

Nina suspected that Relck was not telling her the whole truth. As they stepped back onto her bedroom floor, her annoyance was clear.

Toots tried to reassure her. 'You know he just wants to protect you, Nina. After all, you are his little sister.'

Nina sat on her bed and replayed the conversation in her head. 'You're right, Toots, I'm being silly. Let's go pack. I'm looking forward to seeing Auntie and Grandma,' she said with a smile.



Chapter 4

The lost boy

Nina walked into her mother's room. 'We are packed,' she said, greeting her with an excited smile.

'I hear you have uncovered a mystery,' said her mother.

Nina paused, confused. 'At the cottage?' How did her mother know what she had been up to? She wondered if there was more to this, maybe a secret or a test from the Order.

'Well, isn't that where you have been?' Ruby May smiled, caressing her daughter's hair. 'Well done, my sweet, we're very proud. Come on, let's get the car packed and head off to see Auntie Paulina.'

Nina loved visiting her auntie. She lived in a big city that was very different from their home. Nina liked how the streetlights illuminated the hustle and bustle of people going about their business.

They got into the car and fastened their seatbelts.

'How long will it take to get there?' Nina asked her mother.

Ruby May smiled back at them. 'Only an hour. Why don't you and Toots see how many different trees you can find, and try to figure out what power they hold? The practice will help you become a clever witch.'

The journey flew by as Nina and Toots became engrossed in a heated debate over which trees held certain powers. Night began to fall as they approached the city and as they drew closer to Auntie Paulina's house the buildings and streetlights changed. The night sky made it hard for Nina to make out the buildings, but the lights from within were as bright as suns. To a young girl, it was truly a magical sight.

'We're here!' shouted Nina as they pulled up at the curb.

Toots looked around apprehensively. 'It's too busy,' he hooted grumpily.

Nina turned and chuckled. 'You'll get used to the city, Toots. Just give it a chance.'

Opening the car door, she stepped out onto the concrete with a stretch and a yawn. Out of nowhere a cold wind started up and a single snowflake floated down into Nina's outstretched hand.

'A single flake on a dark night.' She turned to her mother in confusion.

Ruby May just shrugged her shoulders, mystified.

‘But it’s the middle of summer,’ Nina observed.

As she looked up, the heavens opened and snow began to fall thick and fast. Ruby May hurried towards the building. Nina and Toots lagged behind, staring up at the structure in awe. It looked as if it stretched all the way up into the clouds.

‘What floor does your aunt live on?’ asked Toots hesitantly.

‘Only on the fifth floor,’ Nina replied.

Toots hooted loudly. ‘Floor five! That’s much too high to walk up.’ ‘Stop being so miserable. You don’t walk anyway; I always carry you. There is an elevator we can take, although you could always fly,’ she responded pointedly.

‘I don’t like to fly that high!’ Toots squawked.

‘An owl frightened of heights.’ She chuckled. ‘Who would have thought.’

As they approached the main doors, Nina couldn’t contain her excitement. The interior of the building was very bland, but Nina knew that her auntie’s apartment would be different. They hopped into the lift and Nina turned to look at Toots.

‘Aren’t you excited? You’ve never been here before.’

‘Yes, I’m looking forward to it,’ Toots murmured. But Nina could tell something was on his mind.

‘What’s wrong, Toots?’

‘I’ve heard stories about your Grandma from Raspy. He said that she will pluck all my feathers and eat me.’ Toots tried unsuccessfully to hide his fear.

‘Ha! You shouldn’t listen to what Raspy says. Everything will be fine. I’m here with you.’

Somewhat reassured, Toots hopped up onto Nina’s shoulder as they stepped out of the lift and walked towards her auntie’s door. As her mother knocked, Nina leant forward in excitement. The door creaked open an inch. There was a moment of silence, and then a screech came from within.

‘Go away, there’s no one home!’ With that the door slammed shut.

Nina glanced up at her mother.

Ruby May smiled down at her. ‘You know how your grandma likes her jokes. Just try again.’

Nina raised her fist and the door creaked open.

‘What’s the password?’

Toots hooted in alarm. 'I don't like this, Nina. She sounds crazy.'

'Don't be so rude,' Nina chided. 'She's only playing with us, you silly owl. Come on, let's try to guess the password.'

Nina remembered how much her grandma liked frogs.

'Is it frog spawn?' she guessed. A silence came from inside the apartment. 'You are a clever girl. You must get that from me!' her grandma bellowed.

The door flew open to reveal her grandma and auntie standing there with smiles on their faces.

'See,' Nina said to Toots, 'there's nothing to be frightened of.' 'Come in, come in,' said Auntie Paulina, grabbing Nina's suitcase.

Grandma turned to look at Toots. 'What a lovely budgie,' she said. 'He isn't very plump though; he won't make much of a meal.' She winked at Nina.

Toots screeched as quietly as he could, so that Grandma wouldn't notice his fear. Once inside, he saw that the walls were covered in pictures of witches and wizards surrounded by their familiars, as magical animals used to be called.

'Oh no!' cried Auntie Paulina. 'We're out of biscuits. Nina, run to the shop and get some please. It's only two doors down. I'll make a pot of tea.'

Nina eagerly agreed, excited to enjoy this treat with her family. After promising her mother that she wouldn't talk to strangers she set off, Toots clinging to her shoulder. The lift opened and they stepped inside.

'You were right,' Toots admitted. 'Grandma isn't so bad.'

Nina laughed at him as they reached the main entrance with a jolt.

Outside, the shops along the street made for a bright evening. As they opened the door the chilly air struck them. However, it seemed the snow had disappeared without a trace. People hurried past them, not paying much attention to the sight of a young girl and her owl. But Toots was worried.

'Hide me in your coat,' he instructed. Nina unbuttoned it and Toots jumped in. Nina quickly spotted the shop they needed and set off at a brisk pace.

As they passed a dark alleyway something caught her eye. Her witch's instinct told her there was something hiding here.

Toots hooted in annoyance. 'Why have you stopped?'

'I can sense something in the alley down there,' she whispered.

'You should leave it be, it might be dangerous.'

Nina shook her head. 'It looks like a child, definitely no bigger than me.'

'Be careful,' Toots hissed. 'Get your wand out.'

Nina did as he requested, taking care to keep it hidden from the passers-by. She crept forward and began to cast a spell.

'Witchy Witchy Woo, Mother Nature hear my cry.' She reached into her witch's pouch and sprinkled some magic dust. 'I offer you the tail of a rat and the wart of a toad. Grant me the power of light.'

With a swish, a swoosh and a spark from her wand light flooded the alley. A scuffle came from inside the cardboard box, as if a frightened animal had sensed their presence.

'It's okay,' Nina said gently. 'We're not going to hurt you.' 'Who's we?' demanded a small voice.

'Just me and my owl,' Nina replied.

'An owl?' A round, dirty face peered out from underneath the box.

'Are you a witch?'

Nina stepped back in surprise. 'Why do you ask that?'

'My mother has an owl and she is a witch,' he replied, and began to cry.

A flash of red and brown shone in the light as Toots flew out of Nina's coat. He landed on the edge of the box, the young boy transfixed by his bright plumage.

'What's your name?' Toots asked, taking care not to frighten the boy.

'My name is Dillwyn Foster. I'm alone and my parents were taken from our home.'

'Do you know who took them?' Nina asked quietly.

'No, I didn't see anything. I just felt cold. My father grabbed me and helped me escape through the grandfather clock. This is where I ended up. All I heard was my mother saying, "The Red Witch is here." That was the last time I saw my parents.' The boy slumped to the ground with his head in his hands.

'Don't worry, Dillwyn. We will look after you,' Nina promised. 'We'll help you try to find your family.'

The boy stood up. 'Wait!' he called, picking something up off the ground.

'What's that?' Toots asked.

'It's called the Box of Lies,' Dillwyn answered. 'If you write a question on a piece of paper, place it in the box and turn it upside down, you will

know the true answer. Every family has a magic totem and this is ours. I can't lose it.'

'Come on then, let's get you to my auntie's house. My mother will know what to do.' Nina opened her coat and Toots flew inside. She took Dillwyn's hand and set off towards her auntie's place.

Suddenly, a strange man stopped in front of them. 'Where are, you going?' he asked. 'Why aren't your parents with you?'

Toots's muffled hoot came from within Nina's coat. 'Don't trust him, he's a stranger.'

The man started, confused at the sound. Nina considered him. He had a scar on his face and his eyes were as dark as the night sky. He looked like a rough sort of man. Not willing to take any chances, Nina pushed past him, dragging Dillwyn along behind her. The man followed at a run. If not for the crowds blocking the streets, they never would have made it. Arriving at her auntie's building, they dashed up the stairs and slammed the door shut. He stood outside examining the building. Another man with large dreadlocks had joined him. The children ran into the lift and Nina opened her coat to let Toots out.

They arrived at her auntie's floor. Grandma was standing in the doorway waiting for them.

'This is a funny-looking biscuit, Nina,' she smirked. 'You all had better come inside, even you Dillwyn.'

Nina and Toots exchanged confused looks.

'Grandma, do you know him?' Nina asked.

'I know everything,' she replied cheekily. She turned to Dillwyn. 'Once, when you were a very small boy, I visited your family. It's a beautiful place. I landed on the edge of a forest. Being summertime, the trees and plants were blooming in every shade you can imagine. They swayed gently in the summer breeze. I loved every minute of my time there. Your parents are good, kind magic folk.'

Nina had grown frustrated with her grandma's ramblings, and wandered into the living room. She did not hear her mention that

Dillwyn was a wizard and that his parents were also magical, but did not practice anymore. She introduced Dillwyn and began explaining everything to her mother and Auntie Paulina. After listening intently, the two women went to make a pot of tea to calm everyone's nerves, leaving Grandma to soothe the children. As they gathered around the dining table,

Toots perched on the back of Nina's chair. Grandma smiled at the pair, then suddenly jumped up and started to do a dance, kicking her legs in the air.

'Witchy Witchy Woo, I know you. Witchy Witchy Woo, you don't know who you are, but I do. Witchy Witchy Woo,' she whispered, pointing a crooked finger at Nina.

Dillwyn looked astonished. Nina grabbed his hand and threw him a reassuring smile. They heard the jingle of the teapot and Grandma paused, poised as if ready to run. The kitchen door creaked open and, quick as lightning, Grandma was back in her seat. Nina and Dillwyn giggled, not knowing how to react. Auntie Paulina poured the tea and Grandma slurped hers noisily. She noticed their confused faces.

'What are you two looking at?' she responded sharply, a drop of tea hanging off her pointy nose.

'Right you two,' said Nina's mother. 'Once you've had your tea it's off to bed with you. 'Dillwyn can sleep with you in Grandma's room.'

Grandma looked at them with her mouth open. 'Just leave the old woman on the couch,' she said. 'I'll just freeze to death. I'm sure that's what you want now that I'm old and no use.'

'Oh, behave,' Auntie Paulina chided, 'it's the middle of summer!'

Grandma winked at Nina. 'Oh, so now you want to leave me in a room in the blazing sunshine, is that it?' she cackled.

Ruby May turned to Dillwyn. 'What can you tell us about what happened to your parents?' she asked.

He looked upset. 'I don't know anything. All I remember is my parents rushing in and telling me to escape through the secret door in the grandfather clock and to go through the mirror. Suddenly it got really cold, and I heard my mother say that it was the Red Witch. I saw two big green eyes and a black body that looked a cat, watching me through the window as I climbed in.'

'Hang on,' Nina demanded, 'how do you know what happened?'

You seem to know more than we do. A stranger chased us, and you already knew.'

Ruby May smiled. 'He is our friend. He's what we call a watcher. You will find out the hard way about them eventually.'

'Tell me more about this horrid Red Witch,' said Grandma, looking at Dillwyn. 'Which one was it? Was she the large, fat one, the tall one, or the clever one?'

Nina looked at Dillwyn, wondering if there was something she hadn't been told.

'I don't know,' he replied sheepishly.

"That's enough now," Auntie Paulina snapped with a warning glance at Grandma.

'Come on children, it's time for bed,' said Ruby May softly. She led them down the corridor to Grandma's bedroom. Dillwyn shot a look behind him, but the old woman just smiled back.

'She's up to something,' Dillwyn thought to himself.

They entered the bedroom, which had already been set up with a spare bed for Dillwyn. It was bright and clean and not what he was expecting. At last the boy felt safe, as if he was with friends. Old black and white photographs hung on the wall and eyes seemed to follow him wherever he went.

Ruby May sat on the bed and held Dillwyn's hand. 'Tell me about your home,' she asked.

'It's a beautiful place, with green fields and lovely old woods. I spent a lot of time playing there, until the Red Witch arrived.'

'Have you ever seen the Red Witch?' asked Ruby May sharply.

'No, that's only what my parents shouted before they disappeared. But it must have been her. Who else would destroy our home?'

'You shouldn't believe everything you hear Dillwyn,' she replied. 'You should look closely at every situation before you pre-judge.'

Nina found this strange advice. It was almost as if her mother was trying to tell them something else.

Ruby May said her goodnights, kissing Nina's forehead and giving her a hug, proud of the good she had done today. She rested a hand on Dillwyn's shoulder, not wanting to invade his personal space.

After her mother left the room, Nina helped Toots onto an old perch on the sideboard, kissing him goodnight. As she passed the wardrobe, she noticed that the door was ajar. She glanced around, and then quickly peeked inside. Through the open crack, she saw a pair of red boots. As her eyes adjusted she could also make out a long red cape. She looked up and saw a witch's hat hanging in plain sight.

Nina jerked back in shock. Was her grandma the Red Witch?

'Are you okay?' Dillwyn asked, noticing her standing there as if frozen. Realising she might scare Dillwyn, Nina closed the door.

‘Oh yes, I’m fine. It’s full so I’ll just hang my clothes over a chair.’

She raised her eyebrows at Toots, trying to communicate without words. Giving up, she bade them both goodnight and put her head against the pillow. Her mind went into overdrive, wondering what would happen if she confronted her grandma, or told her mother. Still afraid of the man that had followed them, Nina tossed and turned, only to wake up tired and grumpy.

The next morning, she was even tenser, so she decided to talk to Relck.

Disturbed by Nina’s movements, Dillwyn woke and noticed the two were ready for breakfast.

Nina smiled at him. ‘Did you sleep well?’ she asked.

‘Yes, thank you,’ he replied with a sigh, unsure of how he was feeling.

‘Don’t worry,’ Nina said, ‘we’ll do everything we can to help you, starting with paying a visit to the Order. We’ll leave you to get dressed and meet you in the kitchen.’ She left the room to give Dillwyn some privacy.

The whole family greeted her with looks of concern when she entered the dining room. Nina considered her grandma, confused at what she had discovered.

‘Quickly, have some breakfast. You must go straight to the Order this morning,’ said Grandma.

Ruby May tried to shush her.

‘You shouldn’t coddle her, the girl needs to know,’ Grandma responded.

‘Know what?’

‘Someone is coming for you,’ her mother replied. ‘We don’t know who it is, only that they are dangerous and powerful. They managed to block the seer’s vision and freeze her thoughts.’

Dillwyn stumbled into the kitchen, still feeling tired after his ordeal.

‘Hurry up now,’ said Auntie Paulina. ‘Have a quick breakfast, and then it’s off to the Order with you. It’s not safe here.’

Dillwyn sat down heavily, feeling scared and vulnerable once again.

Once they’d all eaten, Nina took Dillwyn by the hand and led him to the mirror. Toots jumped up onto the boy’s shoulder with a flap of his wings. He smiled at the little bird.

‘Travelling by mirror is awful,’ the owl hooted. ‘Your face will be ripped inside out and when you reach the other side you’ll be all mixed up.’

Nina glared at Toots. ‘Stop trying to frighten him, just because Raspy did that to you when you first went through the mirror.’

‘Don’t listen to that silly bird,’ she said, turning to Dillwyn. She squeezed his hand for extra reassurance. He could feel Toots brace himself so he did the same as Nina began to utter the magic words.

‘Witchy Witchy Woo, Mother Nature hear my cry.’ She reached into her witch’s pouch and sprinkled her magic dust. ‘I offer you the wing of a bat and the whisker of a rat. In darkest night and brightest day, transport me to safety.’

With a swish, a swoosh and spark from her wand, a magical force sucked them into the mirror. Dillwyn turned to look back and saw Nina’s family smiling at them as they disappeared.



Chapter 5

Return to safety

Arriving at the Order, Dillwyn was awed by the Great Hall. He found himself wrapped in a yellow witch's cloak.

'It's the mirror that decides what we wear,' Nina told him, noticing his shock.

A worn-looking Relck came forward to greet them. Nina smiled at her older brother as he reached out and hugged her. The Great Hall was warm and inviting, and wizards and witches had gathered to discuss something with the Order. A woman in a deep red cloak and hood also stood by the fire, hiding her face.

Nina thought this odd, but before she could ask, Relck addressed Dillwyn.

'Hello there. I guess you know who I am and where you are,' he said, shooting the boy a reassuring wink.

'Yes,' said Dillwyn quietly, 'you must be Relck.'

The older boy put his arm around the child's shoulder.

'Don't worry,' he said, 'I will look after you. All of you need to stay here for a while until it is safe. I'll be able to explain later.'

He led the three adventurers towards the blazing fire. Nina tried to catch a glimpse of the woman under the red cloak. Keen to hide her identity, the woman kept her face hidden.

A pair of double doors stood next to the fire. Turning the big brass handles, Relck opened these to reveal a darkened hall filled with perches. Only one was occupied.

Nina's mouth fell open at the sight of an enormous owl. She reached out to grab Dillwyn's hand. 'This is a little daunting,' she said.

He nodded in agreement. As they approached the owl they could see he was fast asleep. Relck lit a candle and prodded the bird with his wand.

'Wake up, lazy bird!'

Nina was surprised at Relck, but even more shocked when the owl's head turned to see who had woken him. His big yellow eyes looked frightening as he unfurled his wings. He stood tall, then let out an awful

screech, as if he was going to attack. With a big yawn, he ruffled his feathers, which were the same colour as Raspy's.

He spoke suddenly. 'Yah, man, what yah doing? I was dreaming of the cutest birds on my favourite beach.'

Relck chuckled, 'You wish you were.'

'Yah, you're right, I wish,' the bird snorted.

'I've brought some friends for you to meet,' Relck smirked. He loved to tease Nina and his sister looked indignant. 'This is Dillwyn, who needs your help, and this little girl is Nina.'

Nina thumped Relck in the side as the owl examined her with his big wide eyes.

'Oh, this yah sister then? I've heard so much about yah from Relck. In fact, I think he wishes he were as brave and clever as you. He never shuts up about how much he admires you.'

'Okay, okay,' said Relck, holding up his hands in playful surrender. 'Let's focus on Dillwyn. You know about his family?'

'Yah man, I am sorry to hear about your troubles. I respect you as a brave soul. Come closer, I want to talk to yah.'

Relck nodded at Nina, and they moved to leave the two alone.

Dillwyn looked anxiously back at Nina.

'It's okay, I'll wait in the hall for you,' she promised.

He turned back to the owl.

'Yah all right, man, yah with me now,' the owl reassured him.

As the brother and sister stood outside, Nina smiled cheekily at Relck. 'So you think I'm great, do you?'

He grinned back. 'You're okay. You try your best and that's all that matters.' His face turned serious. 'I want you to know that I'm always there for you. All you have to do is touch a mirror and I'll be with you.'

'I know,' Nina reassured her brother. 'What's all this about?'

Relck refused to meet her eyes, a sure sign he wasn't telling her everything. 'It's just that you spend a lot of time on your own,' he said.

'It might not seem like I'm there much.'

Nina was baffled, wondering what Relck was trying to say.

Just then the door opened and Dillwyn emerged, looking tearful.

'What is it?' Nina asked.

'Some things are private, Nina,' Relck chided.

This whole situation was becoming very frustrating for Nina. It seemed like no one was being honest with her. She put her trust in her brother and kept quiet, following the boys as they set off along the corridor.

Relck led them to a dorm room that was quiet and full of shadows. The only thing lighting it was a warm, crackling fire. Most of the beds were already filled with witches and wizards who had travelled long distances. Relck led them to a pair of empty beds, pulled back the drapes that were used for privacy, and then hurried off with a brisk farewell.

Later that evening, Dillwyn lay on his temporary bed listening to the noises of the night. He wondered who slept around them. There were no windows in the room, only a single candle leaving an eerie reflection on the wall. Looking over to where Toots was perched next to Nina's sleeping body, Dillwyn was happy to have found someone so caring and brave. But in his heart, there was still sorrow. He was scared that he would never see his parents again. He rolled over and buried his head in his pillow. A sense of despair swept over him and he sobbed until he fell asleep, safe in a dream where he was reunited with his parents.

Suddenly, a screech filled the air, and they could hear desperate sobbing. Nina sat up and reached for her wand.

'Witchy Witchy Woo,' she whispered, 'Mother Nature hear my cry.' She grabbed her witch's pouch and sprinkled the magic powder. 'I offer you the leg of a spider and the tail of a newt. Through darkest night and brightest day, give me the power of light.'

With a swish, a swoosh and a spark from her wand, a bright light illuminated the room. The witches and wizards around them sat up, some looking terrified, others exhausted.

Dillwyn ran to Nina. 'I had a nightmare about a dark cavern.'

A witch looked over from the other side of the room, her hair tousled and her face withdrawn. 'I had the same dream,' she told them.

'What about you, Nina, did you see it too?'

'No,' she replied, 'all I heard was a whisper.' Nina was puzzled. Everyone else had experienced the same dream, and all she'd heard was a whispered riddle.

'What did it say?' Dillwyn asked.

'It said, "Where there was light, there is now darkness; where there was song, there is only silence. Where there was joy and happiness, only sorrow can be found; and where there was love, there is now only emptiness."'

‘Looking at the frost that had built up through the night, they could see tiny footprints across the floor. They led to a dark corner, where a disused lampshade hid a gap in the stone skirting. As she stepped out of her warm bed, Nina’s breath froze and dropped to the floor in a million shards of ice. The witches and wizards around them began putting on their shoes. They followed the footsteps and examined the gap. What on earth could have come through it? The footsteps were small, but human in shape.

They all agreed that they needed to find the creatures that had trespassed into their room.

There was a crisp crack as the frosted door opened and Relck stepped inside.

‘What’s going on?’ he asked Nina. She pointed at the tracks.

‘How is this possible?’ asked a wizard.

Relck looked at Nina.

‘I don’t know,’ she said, shrugging her shoulders.

‘Well then, I think we should all get a good night’s sleep and speak about this tomorrow. Whatever it is seems to be gone for now.’

The people in the room agreed, feeling uneasy. However, they knew that no answers would be found in the dark and mysterious night.

Relck attended to the dying fire, stoking it briskly. A cheering smell soon filled the air as the flames grew, warming the frozen room and soothing their fear. As they lay back in their beds, the witches and wizards soon fell back to sleep, hopefully for the rest of the night.

Near dawn the room began to stir with witches and wizards rushing around, ready to begin their day. The doors to the room stood open and Relck stood waiting for them to leave. Nina greeted him with a smile, wondering what was on his mind.

Relck looked at Nina with a familiar gaze. Was something wrong? Waiting for the other witches and wizards to leave, Relck approached the troublesome pair.

Abruptly, he said, ‘You will have to go home with Toots. Whatever was here last night was looking for you, sister!’

Nina frowned. ‘How do you know that?’

‘The footprints were all around your bed.’ Relck told her. ‘Strangely, it looked like whatever it was had been dragging something. Come, we will go see the Inventor, see if he has any news that could help us.’

They walked through the Great Hall, Toots safely on his best friend's shoulder. Witches and wizards were touching the mirror and disappearing on their daily tasks. All eyes were on the four of them as they walked to the corridor leading to the Inventor's room. The sun shone brightly through windows cut into the roof, illuminating the corridor.

Reaching the door, Relck knocked and turned the worn doorknob slowly, giving his friend time to hide his secrets. Entering the room, they were greeted with a smile.

'Ah,' he said, 'you must be Dillwyn. It is nice to see you again.' 'Have we met?' Dillwyn asked curiously.

'Yes. You will not remember, as you were only young, but I gave your family their magic gift.'

'You made the box of lies?'

'Not quite,' the Inventor laughed, 'but I helped invent it, and Mr and Mrs Tinker put the magic in. But I made the box.'

'That's enough of stories and pleasantries,' Relck said impatiently.

'Have you any new news for us?'

The Inventor shook his head in disappointment.

Relck sighed. 'Okay, let's have you home, Nina. Mum and dad are anxious to see you home safe.'

Nina did not like the thought of leaving Dillwyn alone after they had been through so much together.

They left the Inventor to his tasks and strode towards the mirror.

'I don't like to send you away like this, but you know it's to keep everyone safe.' Nina found this pronouncement strange. It was not something she was used to from her brother.

She said goodbye to Dillwyn with a gentle hug and smiled at Relck, who gave her a wink and grin.

Touching the mirror, Nina whispered her magic words.

'Witchy Witchy woo, hear my cry Mother Nature.' Reaching into her witch's bag, she sprinkled her magic dust. 'I offer you the wart from a toad and the whisker of a cat. In coldest night and warmest day, send me through time and space.'

With a swish, a swoosh and a spark from her wand they were gone.

Nina arrived home. Stepping into her bedroom, she felt relieved to be somewhere familiar, glad to know there was someone waiting to comfort her.

She heard a tap on the bedroom door and rushed to open it. There stood her parents. She embraced them warmly, happy to see them.

‘Come on, my sweet little girl,’ her father said. ‘Let’s go get some fresh air in the garden.’

The day flew by as she spent time with her parents. Toots passed the time perched in the trees, pruning himself. Late in the afternoon, Ruby May went inside to start the tea, leaving father and daughter to spend some quality time together. She watched from a small window in the kitchen as they played happily.

At a shout from Ruby May, Nina and Reginald rushed indoors, full of laughter. They washed up and devoured the sandwiches waiting for them.

The evening went by quickly, and Nina went upstairs for an early bath. As usual, Toots stood guard on his perch, waiting for his best friend to retire to bed. Soon Nina was tucked up in bed. Her parents entered the room and gave her a kiss and a hug goodnight. Reginald patted Toots on his head, as if to say ‘you’re in charge for the night’. Nina lay in her bed, happy at what they had achieved throughout the day, but sad to have left Dillwyn alone at the Order.

She fell into a deep, deep sleep, tired after the excitement of the day. Suddenly her sleep was disturbed by a strange noise. Startled, she switched on her light.

Toots flapped his wings and covered his eyes. ‘Nina! What are you doing? The light is hurting my eyes!’ he screeched.

Nina ignored him, looking around desperately for the shadow she had seen. It had disappeared behind her curtains before her eyes adjusted.

Looking at Toots, Nina said, ‘Look around the room and behind the curtain, will you?’

Using his big eyes, accustomed to spotting things Nina couldn’t, he scanned the room.

‘What did you see? Did you hear that noise in the room?’ she asked nervously.

Toots looked at Nina. ‘I can’t see anything, but there is a strange smell.’ Nina stared at Toots with her mouth open.

He froze. ‘What is it? Is there something behind me?’ he tried to mutter out of the corner of his beak.

This made Nina smile. She got out of bed and moved closer to his perch.

Toots began to panic. ‘What is it?’ he screeched.

‘Your feathers!’ Nina cried fearfully.

Toots looked down at his feathers, and recoiled in shock. ‘What has happened to my beautiful feathers?’

‘I don’t know,’ replied Nina, ‘but they’re turning white! Where they used to be yellow they’re now as white as fresh snow!’

Over in the next room, Relck had just arrived through the mirror. Hearing the noise from Nina’s bedroom, he crossed the landing and peered inside. He took in Nina’s worried face, before noticing Toots’s feathers.

‘What has happened?’ he asked in surprise.

‘I don’t know,’ Nina replied, shrugging her shoulders and feeling fearful for her best friend. ‘I had a dream,’ she told Relck. ‘I could hear a girl whispering. She tried to tell me something, something important. “In the darkest of nights, a blue moon will shine. Lighting the way into the deepest black. A cavern that has no end and noises that come from within will turn your hair bright white. Only the brave and true will see the light of the blue moon as a gift from Mother Nature.” That’s what I remember.’

‘I know of this place,’ Relck said. ‘It’s a story the Inventor has told me many times. It is said that no one knows where the cavern is, as no one has ever returned from seeking it. All we have is a worn map and stories from unsuccessful expeditions.’ He paused. ‘Now what happened here?’ he demanded.

‘I heard a noise,’ Nina told him. ‘When I turned on the light all we could see was Toots’s feathers.’

Suddenly the group heard slow, heavy footsteps coming from outside the room. It sounded as if dragging feet were moving closer to the bedroom. Relck glanced at Nina with a smile; they could tell it was Raspy.

The door flew open and the owl barged his way past Relck. ‘What’s going on?’ he asked in his raspy voice of authority.

Nina pointed at Toots. ‘Look at Toots’s beautiful feathers!’

Raspy stood with his beak open. He looked down frantically to check that he had not been affected. When he had inspected his own unchanged plumage, he sighed in relief.

He let out a hoot of laughter. ‘We’re going to have to call you Snowflake from now on.’

Toots and Nina laughed, grateful to Raspy for making light of a bad situation. But they also knew that this was his way of coping with fear.

‘This is not good,’ he hooted. ‘This happened to your grandfather, before...’ Raspy paused and a silence filled the air.

‘What?’ Toots hooted in alarm. ‘Before he vanished?’ The room was silent again.

‘We must take you to the Order, Toots,’ Relck decided, fearing the worst. He paused as he noticed something under Nina’s bed. He knelt on the floor, reaching under the bed to pull out a scrap of fabric.

‘What is that?’ Nina asked him.

‘It’s your soothing blanket and teddy bear from when you were tiny.’ ‘My what?’ Nina looked at him in confusion.

‘You had this blanket with you constantly until you were four. It’s strange; you said you gave it to the troll princess that lived under your bed. None of us had ever heard of them, so we thought you had just made it up. This is very weird; it must be a clue.’ His head snapped up.

‘Quickly now, Raspy, and I will take Toots to the Order. You tell Mom and Dad, Nina, and we will meet you there.’

Nina looked at Toots, her eyes glazed over with tears. She hugged her friend quickly and they left. Nina only saw the back of them as they disappeared through the mirror.

She rushed into her parents’ room and explained what was going on. Hugging her parent’s goodbye, she dashed back to her mirror. They called out to her, ‘We are with you.’

With a smile, she pulled out her witch’s pouch and whispered the magic words. ‘Witchy Witchy woo, Mother Nature hear my cry.’ She reached in and sprinkled her magic dust. ‘I offer you wing of a bat and the tail of a rat. Through time and space send me to the Order.’

Touching the mirror, she vanished, appearing in the Great Hall wearing thick dark clothes, as if she was meant to be somewhere else. There was a crowd gathered there.

Relck turned to greet Nina, and, by the look on his face, she could tell it was not good news. She stood rooted to the spot, preparing to hear what Relck had to tell her.

‘He’s okay, Nina,’ Relck said as he hugged his little sister. ‘You best go to see our Grandma, see if she can help.’

‘Grandma! How can she help?’

‘She knows more about tales than anyone, remember?’ Relck looked down at her. ‘Remember, I’m with you whenever you need me.’

There wasn't time to see Toots or Dillwyn, so she ran back to the mirror and whispered the magic words.

'Witchy Witchy woo, Mother Nature hear my cry.' She sprinkled her magic dust. 'I offer you the whisker of a rat and the wing of bat. Through day and night, send me to Auntie Paulina's.'

With a swish, a swoosh and a spark from her wand, she touched the mirror and vanished.

Nina stepped out of the mirror and into Grandma's bedroom. The older woman sat waiting for her on the bed.

'Hello my dear,' she called.

Nina started, surprised to find her grandma expecting her.

'You took your time,' Grandma said, grinning.

Remembering the red cloak in the wardrobe, Nina felt uncomfortable. 'Where you expecting me? How did you know I was coming to see you?' she asked.

'I know everything, my sweet girl,' Grandma replied cheekily.

Noting the sadness on Nina's face, Grandma stopped her game. 'What is it Nina?' she asked.

'Do you know anything about trolls that live under beds?' Nina asked tremulously.

'Ah, so you finally met your old friend the princess again,' said Grandma.

'Who is the princess? So, the trolls are real? What are they?' Nina asked hurriedly.

'What a lot of questions!' exclaimed Grandma. 'The trolls have lived for as long as the stories have been told. Come, sit here and I will tell you all I know.'

'In the dark of the night something waits and lurks under your bed. You shouldn't be afraid of the trolls; they come to take the nightmares away. They have a special gift for recognising bad dreams. They lie in wait for their ears to tingle. Their dance begins with the stamping of their feet. Their magic lies in the nets they carry to scoop out the fear and sadness from your dreams. As soon as the dance finishes they vanish into the cracks between the walls. They travel to the hidden grotto in where the king and queen live, taking the unwanted dreams with them, to be consumed by the dark cavern.'

Nina filled in her grandma on everything that had happened. 'What do I do now, Grandma?'

'The only thing we can do is try to use the box of lies to find the hidden grotto,' Grandma replied thoughtfully.

'We?' asked Nina in surprise.

'Of course,' said Grandma. 'I can't leave you to do this on your own. It could be dangerous.'

Together the pair went downstairs and into the dining room. The box stood on the table, as if it were waiting for them. Sitting down, discussed what they should do.

'You need to write a question that is the exact opposite of the answer you want,' Grandma instructed.

Nina took a scrap of paper from her witch's pouch.

'It has to be written in magic,' Grandma told her. 'Use your wand.'

Nina pointed her wand at the paper and the words 'where is the found grotto?' appeared on it. She lifted the lid and placed the paper inside the box. Then she held it in her hands and turned it upside down. A light shone from every side as the magic symbols began to glow from within.

Just as suddenly, it stopped. Grandma and Nina looked at each other in amazement. Nina reached out and slowly turned the box upside down, opened the lid and grabbed the paper. Sure enough there was now an answer on the other side.

The hidden grotto lies in the Scottish Highlands, but you must travel through the mirror that hides in the mushroom under the Firma.

Nina was confused. 'How can I travel through a mushroom?' she asked.

'Magic has a funny way of helping us witches through the tough tasks,' Grandma reminded her. 'But we may have to make a potion for shrinking witches.'

'What!' Nina looked worried. 'I've never taken a potion before.'

'It will be fine, my dear,' Grandma reassured her. 'We have to go to the attic.'

Mystified, Nina followed Grandma out the apartment door, and into the lift. As they travelled upwards in silence, Nina could barely contain her excitement about experiencing her first potion.

'You didn't see what numbers I pressed, did you my dear?' Grandma asked her abruptly.

Nina was bemused. Grandma had pressed the button for the top floor three times, right in front of her eyes.

‘No Grandma,’ she replied dutifully, catching on.

‘That’s a good girl.’ Grandma chuckled, winking. The lift stopped and the doors slowly opened to reveal the roof of the apartment block. In the centre stood a door, all on its own. Grandma pulled out her wand from her cardigan. Nina had never seen her grandma’s wand before. It curved into a point that looked strangely like her nose.

Grandma touched the top right corner of the door with her wand. She did the same to the left and then drew a straight line downwards with her wand. A light shone through the keyhole.

Just as Nina crouched to peek through the keyhole, the door opened.

‘Grandma,’ said Nina curiously, ‘you didn’t say a spell to Mother Nature.’

Grandma turned and winked her. ‘I haven’t had to since I turned, err... you’ll find out in good time, dear.’

The door opened to reveal a large room. In the centre stood a huge cauldron. The room was full of shelves that held all kinds of books. Also, sitting there were jars containing the wings of bats, warts from toads, whiskers from cats, and all manner of leaves and herbs.

Walking towards the cauldron, Grandma lifted her wand and struck it towards the base. With a loud whoosh, flames engulfed the cauldron. Grandma reached for a book titled *The Red Witch’s Spells*.

Nina froze. This was the second time she had seen evidence that suggested her grandma was the Red Witch.

‘Come on, dear,’ Grandma called softly, her book in one hand and her wand in the other.

‘I need the wing of a bat, the tail of a newt, the bark of whispering willow and a dash of milk. Hurry, dear!’

Nina stopped looking at her and fetched the things she’d asked for. As she dropped them in, the flames grew higher and whatever was inside bubbled and boiled.

Grandma lifted her wand and took a big swing, as if she meant to throw it in as well. Thrusting her arm forward, she stopped with the tip of her wand just touching the water. A poof of green smoke shot up, catching Grandma in the face and turning her green. She looked at Nina and they both burst into laughter.

‘I only washed my hair last month as well!’ Grandma said with a wink. ‘Pass me that small bottle on the shelf, dear.’

Lifting a ladle from the cauldron, she poured the potion into the bottle. Grandma turned to look at Nina.

‘There you go! Once you reach the hidden grotto, drink one sip of that.’

‘Yuk!’ Nina cried. ‘I have to drink a bat’s wing and the tail of a newt? That’s disgusting!’

‘You haven’t tasted it yet,’ Grandma replied. ‘It’s even worse than it looks. But part of being a witch is doing things you don’t like sometimes. Once you want to leave the grotto, all you need to do is have another sip and you should become your normal size again.’ Grandma waved her wand and the smoke vanished. ‘Now, it’s time you were off, my dear.’ ‘You’re not coming with me?’ Nina asked in surprise.

‘No, my dear,’ Grandma said. ‘This is your task. Besides, I’m too old now. I need to rest.’

Not knowing what to make of the whole situation, Nina looked at her grandma. ‘Can I go get Toots and Relck?’

‘No, my dear.’ Grandma smiled. ‘It’s just you, I’m afraid. But I am with you.’

Those were the words that Relck had taught her to say to Toots. It must have something to do with being able to travel through the mirror, she thought.

As they walked back onto the rooftop, the door shut behind them, and the magical light faded quickly. Entering the lift, Grandma pressed the button for her floor. Nina rode down quietly, worried about what was ahead. She smiled at Grandma as the lift stopped, trying not to show how scared she was.

The lift stopped and they walked back inside Auntie Paulina’s apartment. Grandma turned to her.

‘I hope you’re ready for what’s ahead. If you ever need help, all you have to do is touch the mirror and I’ll be with you.’

With a deep breath, Nina walked into the bedroom and touched the mirror. ‘Witchy Witchy Woo, Mother Nature hear my cry.’ She sprinkled her magic dust around her. ‘I offer you the whisker of a cat and the wing of a bat. Through time and space, take me to the hidden grotto.’ With a swish and a swoosh of her wand she was gone.

Nina landed in a puddle at the edge of a forest. She looked down to find herself dressed in tartan clothes. There was nothing for it but to plunge forth into the unknown. She took her first tentative steps forward, noting the eerie atmosphere created by the shadowy trees. They seemed to be following her every move. She was following a narrow trail, clearly made by something small. She kept her wand at the ready, certain she was about to stumble past a clue.

As she reached the end of the trail, she started in surprise. Hundreds of tiny mushrooms lay before her, stretching on into the distance.

‘This must be where I take the potion,’ she thought to herself. Nina reached into her pocket and pulled the little bottle out, examining it closely. It was an awful sludgy green colour. As she opened the lid a horrid smell filled her nostrils. Closing her eyes, she took a sip. Whoosh! A blast of strong wind surrounded her. She felt as if she was being forced to the ground as her body shrunk. She opened her tiny new eyes and looked around.

The world looked very different from this perspective. The mushrooms, which had previously been tiny, now seemed to tower over her. She placed the potion into her witch’s pouch and began to cast a spell of light.

‘Witchy Witchy Woo, Mother Nature hear my cry.’ She sprinkled her magic dust. ‘I offer you the tail of a newt and the whisker of a rat. Through the darkest of nights to the lightest of days, give me the power of light.’

With a swish, a swoosh and a spark from her wand, light began to glow around her. Nina continued through the mushrooms until she noticed a large one with a mirror on its trunk.

She reached out to touch the mirror. It seemed like she did not need a spell to use this one, as she flowed easily through to the other side. Four tunnels lay before her, and the smell of frozen earth filled her nostrils. She turned this way and that, wondering which tunnel to take. A faint light was coming from the one on her left, so she made her choice. Heading towards it, she heard a scuffle and murmuring voices. Nina stepped into the light, noticing the icicles hanging from the frozen ceiling. She was in a large hall filled with small green creatures. They looked like humans, but not one of them could have been more than a foot high. Silence filled the air as the room turned as one to look at her.

‘A witch!’ one exclaimed.

‘Is it the Red Witch?’ another asked.

A whisper echoed through the room.

‘Why, my friend has come at last,’ came a softer voice.

The crowd parted as a small creature approached her. It was dressed in mixed tartan clothes and wore a small crown atop its head.

‘Hello, my friend,’ it said. ‘My name is Nasharie. I am princess of the trolls that live under the bed. Did you get my clues?’ ‘The blanket?’ Nina asked, still a little confused.

‘Yes,’ replied the troll, ‘do you have it with you?’

‘No,’ Nina said, ‘but I can get it for you.’

‘Thank you, my friend. It is a most treasured possession. You gave it to me when you were younger. You were my first dream catcher to protect and you could tell I was afraid so you gave me your blanket. I rarely let it out of my sight.’

‘What am I here for?’ Nina asked the princess, still unsure.

‘We need your help, Nina. My mother, our queen, has been taken. We are being held captive in this frozen world and are being forced to take good dreams and leave the bad. It is not in our nature to do this, so the clans are fighting with each other. Our song is also gone. Even my father refuses to sing.’

‘Sing?’ Nina asked in confusion.

‘Our kind have always loved to sing,’ the princess told her. ‘We have special senses. Our ears tingle and then our dance begins. The King of the Trolls, my father, would sing to us after every bad dream we took.’ ‘How exactly did your mother disappear?’ Nina enquired.

‘She vanished while out catching dreams,’ replied the princess. ‘All we could find were icicles and frozen footprints. Lying beside these was a scroll with demands on it. But be warned – it is a cursed scroll! The clans are blaming the ice goblins, but no one knows where they are.’ ‘But how can I help?’ asked Nina.

‘We need a seer or a witch powerful enough to find out where they are,’ said the princess.

‘Okay,’ said Nina. ‘I will go to the Order and see if my brother Relck or the seer have any clues.’

‘Thank you,’ said Nasharie, hugging Nina tightly.

‘It’s my pleasure,’ Nina told her. ‘But I must go now. It’s getting late and I need to find Relck.’

The clans followed Nina back out the strange entrance, wishing her good luck. She stepped forward and passed through it, finding herself amongst the mushrooms again. With a sigh, she reached into her witch's pouch and drank a bit more of her grandma's potion.

The wind whooshed around her once more and she shot upwards, back to her normal size. There was just enough light from her wand to direct her back to the puddle, and she hurried through the woods.

Nina withdrew her wand and grabbed her witch's pouch. She did not want to spend any more time in this place.

'Witchy Witchy Woo, Mother Nature hear my cry,' she said. 'I offer you the wart of a toad and the wing of a bat.' She sprinkled her magic dust. 'Through time and space take me to the Order.'

With a swish and a swoosh of her wand she touched the puddle and was gone.

She reappeared almost instantly in the dimly lit Great Hall. She jumped as a shadow moved in the corner.

'Hello, my sister,' said a friendly voice. 'What have you found out?'

'Relck!' cried Nina. 'I've met trolls that live under the bed. Their clans think it's the ice goblins that are causing all this terrible heartache. They suspect them of kidnapping the Queen of the Trolls.'

Relck was proud of what his sister had achieved. He got up and walked over to give his sister a hug, pleased that she was safe.

She returned his embrace. 'Why aren't you asleep, Relck?' she asked, curious.

'I couldn't rest while you were out all alone now, could I?' he returned

'I guess not,' she said. 'What we need to do now is find the seer, or a powerful witch. Maybe even the Red Witch,' she hinted, still curious about this mysterious woman.

Relck paused, then agreed. 'I'll go see if she's around,' he told her.

'Where does she live?'

Relck smiled. 'In a tree,' he said. 'She can be a little eccentric.' He looked at his sister, noticing how tired she looked. 'Why don't you go get some sleep? Toots and Dillwyn are in the dormitories and there is a spare bed next to them.'

Nina was so excited she forgot how tired she was. She has missed the support and company of her best friend. She slipped inside, through the

creaking door, and saw him perched on the end of a bed. Sneaking into the bed next to him, she drifted off to sleep almost instantly.

It seemed like only moments later she was awakened by a hoot of delight. Toots was perched on the end of her bed, clearly beside himself with happiness. Nina grabbed him in a tight hug. Dillwyn watched on smiling, pleased to see his new friend safe.

‘What time is it?’ Nina asked him. ‘Has Relck come back to see me?’

‘No,’ Toots hooted, ‘we haven’t seen him.’

Nina jumped out of bed and scrambled into some clothes. ‘Come on,’ she said, ‘let’s go find him then.’

The trio hurried into the Great Hall, where witches and wizards were hurrying around on their daily business. As they glanced around the room they saw Relck step out of the mirror.

‘He’s not alone,’ said Nina, ‘he has the seer.’

The tall woman stood next to Relck with her hood up to hide her identity. They both saw Nina looking at them, and words were exchanged. The seer walked off towards the Inventor’s room. Nina started towards Relck.

‘How did it go?’ she asked. ‘Do you have any information to help rescue the Troll Queen?’

‘Yes,’ he said, looking at her solemnly. ‘The seer found a riddle. We think it tells us where the queen is kept.’ He passed Nina a piece of paper that said: The shimmering lake hides in a cave; a frozen entrance blocks the way. In the glens, you’ll find the secret you seek. Under the silver birch is where the entrance will be found.

Relck looked at her with a frown. ‘You must go back to where the trolls under the bed live.’

‘Can Toots and Dillwyn come too?’ Nina asked.

‘No,’ said Relck. ‘There is still something very wrong in the magic world. We have to keep them safe.’

Nina did not like the thought of going alone. Relck sensed her disappointment and gave her a warm hug.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘You must go now, while it is still light outside.’

‘You’re right,’ Nina said in a voice of resignation. Bidding goodbye to Toots and Dillwyn, she walked to the mirror.

‘Be careful of what lurks in the woods,’ Toots hooted.

She nodded at him, and then began to recite the magic words. ‘Witchy Witchy woo, Mother Nature hear my cry. I offer you the whisker of a rat and the wing of a bat.’ She sprinkled her magic dust. ‘Through time and space take me to the glens where the trolls under the bed live.’

With a swish and a swoosh of her wand, she touched the mirror and was gone.

Nina arrived at the same puddle as before, just by the edge of the forest. Although the day was bright, the mirror had dressed her in snow gear. She stood for a moment, feeling rather lost. A rustling patch of thistles caught her eye and out popped Nasharie.

‘Hello, my friend!’ she called at the top of her voice, so Nina could hear her.

Nina knelt on the ground. ‘Is it safe for you to be out in the day?’

‘I’ve come to offer you a bit of advice. The silver birch is in the centre of the woods, but you must be very wary of those that live there. Use your wand to protect yourself, and go as quickly as you dare.’ Nasharie smiled at Nina. ‘Good luck, my friend!’ she said as she disappeared into the thistles.

Nina took a deep breath and set off into the forest. The light from the blue summer sky lit the trees. She could only see a few small shadows fluttering in the thicket above the trees. She was on alert, sensing danger up ahead. There were no birds singing or animals scurrying along the ground. It was as if something had chased them away.

After walking for some time, she noticed a thick growth of trees ahead. The branches touched the floor, as if hiding the way. Nina hesitated. This was becoming harder than she had anticipated, but at least no one was following her. Turning back to the trees, she gathered her inner strength and pushed past the trees with her wand held high. The thicket fought her every step of the way.

As she finally broke through, the cold chilled her to the bone. Before her stood the tree. Its huge branches dominated the clearing. A small hole at the base of the trunk was completely frozen over. She stepped forward to take a closer look. The nearer she got, the more the darkness began to close in on her. Nina lifted her wand and summoned a spell.

‘Witchy witchy woo, Mother Nature hear my cry. I offer you the tail of a rat and the eye of newt.’ She sprinkled her magic dust. ‘In the darkest night and the brightest day give me the power of light.’

With a swish and a swoosh of her wand the clearing glowed as bright as day.

With a renewed sense of confidence, Nina squeezed into a crack under the tree. The small entrance opened into a large cavern where ice had built up on the floor. She shone her wand around the room, noticing that there was no other way out. The walls twinkled as the light touched the ice.

‘What to do now?’ she thought to herself. She was relieved that, yet, there was no foe to face. Nina sat on a frozen rock, wondering if she should return to the Order. Her wand slipped from her fingers and she lost her train of thought. As she bent down to retrieve it, she noticed something underfoot. It was water! The cavern was a pond, frozen solid. This gave her an idea.

Lifting her wand, she fired the light high and whispered: ‘Witchy Witchy Woo, Mother Nature hear my cry. I offer you the wart of a toad and the leg of spider.’ She sprinkled her magic dust. ‘Through the darkest night and brightest day, give me the power of the sun.’

With a swish and a swoosh of her wand, she touched the pond and melted the ice.

With a splash, Nina disappeared through the pond and into a room under the water and ice. It was wet and cold, but remained lit by her wand. She was in a small cavern designed to hide something out of sight. She noticed an ice cage in the corner, and something moved within it. She stepped closer, her breath icy and her teeth chattering. With her neck craned, she still struggled to see what was inside.

‘Who are you?’ a small voice asked. The tiny voice clued Nina in as to who this was.

‘Are you the Queen of the Trolls that live under the bed?’ she asked, just to make sure.

‘Yes, I am,’ said the voice. ‘Who are you?’

‘I’m Nina,’ she replied. ‘I am a friend of Nasharie. I am here to try and save you. Your clan misses you terribly. Your daughter has been very brave, but your absence is taking its toll on her.’ ‘I will be glad of your help,’ said the queen.

There wasn’t a moment to lose, so Nina lifted her wand and whispered a spell. ‘Witchy Witchy Woo, Mother Nature hear my cry. I offer you the wing of a bat and the tooth of rat.’ She sprinkled her magic dust. ‘In the coldest night and warmest day, give me the power to release this troll.’ With

a swish and a swoosh, a bright spark shot from the end of her wand and surrounded the cage.

Instantly the ice around the queen began to melt. Nina knelt to help her to her feet.

‘Are you all right?’ Nina asked.

‘Yes, I am, thanks to you,’ the queen replied. ‘But I must get back to my family, and my kingdom.’

‘Of course,’ said Nina. ‘Here, let me help you.’ She picked up the queen and held her gently in her hand. Then she pointed her wand at the ceiling and the two of them shot upwards, landing just outside the crack in the tree.

‘Let’s get you home,’ said Nina. ‘Your clan will be waiting for you anxiously.’

The pair brushed through the thicket and stepped out to find an army of trolls waiting for them, dressed all in tartan. They knelt at the sight of their queen, and begged her to let them escort her safely home. Nina gently placed the troll queen on the ground, as a huge cheer erupted from the army.

The queen turned and spoke to Nina. ‘You have done a lot of good today. You gave me my family back, and now we can make sure that everyone’s dreams are sweet and full of light. Thank you for breaking the curse that had been put upon us.’ She bowed to Nina and bade her farewell.

As the army of trolls turned to escort the queen home, one little troll turned to wink at Nina. It was the princess. She waved goodbye, before hurrying through the woods towards her puddle.

The sky was dimming, and Nina knew it must be time for tea, as a hunger churned inside of her.

‘It’s time I was getting home,’ Nina said aloud. She lifted her wand and cried: ‘Witchy Witchy Woo, Mother Nature hear my cry. I offer you the wing of a moth and the wart of a toad.’ She sprinkled her magic dust. ‘I miss my family and my hunger grows, take me home where I belong.’

With a swish and a swoosh of her wand she touched the puddle and was gone.

All eyes were on Nina as she stepped out of the mirror and into her bedroom. Toots and her parents were waiting to greet her.

‘We are so proud of you. Relck has told us everything you have done,’ said her father. They all gathered around to give her a big hug full of warmth and love.

Nina looked at her family, and smiled happily. ‘I love being a witch,’ she declared.

Join Nina in her second instalment of this series in April called The Little Witch and the magic gift. She will face more dangers and unfamiliar surroundings as well as uncovering secrets her family hides.

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